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STUDENT REACTIONS TO GRADED AND NON-GRADED COURSES [1]

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STUDENT REACTIONS TO GRADED AND NON-GRADED COURSES

Grading has been a focal point of educational conflict for decades, but no more or so than during the late 60's and early 70's. Grading was condemned for generating unnecessary anxiety about performance, leading to the substitution of the "grade" as an end rather than as an indicator of learning, and drastically limiting the feedback given to the student. New approaches were called for (e.g., Lewis, 1973).

The discussion of suggested options was as torrid as the original conflict over grading. Some saw each new proposal as the revolution to reestablish the true meaning of education while others commented, with equal certainty, that all integrity would be stripped from the educational process. Much of this discussion took place untempered by anything resembling objective data.

An alternative to grading that has been tried (and adopted by at least one college, a women's liberal arts college) provides the student with a written critique at the end of the course. These "evaluations" are placed in the students file and sent out in lieu of a transcript with grades. Because negative comments can be made in the "evaluations", there is more incentive to do effective work than is the case with the pass/fail system, the most commonly used alternative to grading. Though it is common to decry the need for such extrinsic motivators, their absence in non-graded approaches has evoked much negative reaction. However, the elmination of grading may reduce anxiety (Karlins, 1969) and competition while expanding learning beyond that material which would be covered on tests.

Having to provide a critique rather than assigning a grade requires a faculty member to know more about a student's work than is the case routinely. To facilitate this, the institution has limited class size to twenty and encouraged discussion-oriented classes, the use of papers rather than exams and regular student-faculty conferences during the semester.

It would be useful to establish whether these changes have an impact on the way students work, their interaction with the faculty and their perceptions of how much they accomplish in a course. A unique local arrangement allowed an interesting comparison. In addition to (or instead of) those courses taken where an evaluation is given, the students may take courses at a coordinate college where grades are given. These graded courses generally seem larger, lecture-oriented and examination-based.

Comparisons of students taking a course on a pass/fail basis with those taking the course for a grade have been made almost exclusively by using the grades that would have been given to the pass/fail students for the work they did (e.g. Feldmesser, 1971; Gold, et al. 1971; Karlins, 1969; Quinn, 1974; Stallings and Smock, 1971). These studies generally indicate that pass/fail students do not do so well as those working for a grade. Gold, et al., in a conclusion that would be widely shared, indicate that "students have learned how to work for grades and appear to learn a little in the process. It is as yet doubtful whether many have discovered how to learn without grades" (p. 21). Those instituting the evaluation approach hoped to disprove this. While this study was unable to assess learning directly, a variety of learning-related behaviors were measured.

Subjects and Procedure

Seventy students were randomly selected from the sophomore class of 150 women. A 24-item questionnaire was handed to each subject during the last week of the semester by one of the researchers* and an appeal was made for its return.

* Betty Barrer, Melinda Foley, Paulette Humphrey, Barbara Naumann and Deborah Rappaport assisted.

Sixty questionnaires (86%) were returned. Data were used from only those students taking at least one evaluation and one graded course. Forty-seven students provided usable data.

The questionnaire asked the students to record, for each class they were taking: class size, an estimate of hours studied per week, the number of out-of-class talks with the professor, and the number of exams and papers required. A series of five-point scales followed designed to assess the students' perceptions of the professor's role in the course and how they responded to the course.

Results

Repeated measures t-tests were used in comparing the reports of the two types of courses. As was expected, students reported that the graded courses were larger, had more exams and had the professor talking more of the time. In the evaluation courses, there was more perceived freedom, more assigned papers and the professor more often knew the students (all differences are significant at $p < .05$, two-tailed test). On a number of key questions there were no differences. The students said the reading loads were similar and that they studied about as much, worked about as hard, got about as anxious and had about the same number of out-of-class contacts with the professors in the two kinds of courses. They also perceived that the professors made equally sincere attempts to know them, knew their work equally well and provided equal amounts of feedback.

Three interesting differences were identified. Students reported completing more of the reading in evaluation courses but being more satisfied with and getting more out of the graded courses. This last difference was the most thought-provoking, as none of the other differences prepared one for it.

In an attempt to identify factors related to the perception of "getting something out of" a course, the ratings on this scale were correlated with all other

questionnaire items. As there were extreme differences in class size which might affect the ratings, correlations partialing out class size were used. Data from both kinds of courses were treated together.

The major correlate of the perception of "getting something out of" a course was the amount of feedback (comments, criticism, suggestions) on the student's work the professor provided (.57, $p < .001$); also related was feeling that the course was enjoyable (.29, $p < .05$).

Again using partial correlations to control for class size, the relational network in which feedback was enmeshed was explored. Feedback was positively correlated with the number of out-of-class talks with the professor (.44, $p < .002$), how much of an effort the professor made to know the students (.46, $p < .001$), how well the professor knew the student's work (.67, $p < .001$), the student's perception of how hard she worked (.62, $p < .001$), the amount of feedback from other students (.44, $p < .002$), satisfaction with the course (.41, $p < .005$) and the amount of anxiety experienced in the course (.37, $p < .01$). Feedback was negatively correlated with the number of in-class exams (-.31, $p < .03$) and uncorrelated with the number of papers written.

Discussion

These data suggest that the use of evaluations is a potentially viable alternative to grading, though their use does not seem to reap all the benefits hoped for. Students report working as hard in evaluation courses as in graded ones. In fact, they complete more of the assigned reading, possibly because of the discussion emphasis. Getting an evaluation does not let the student "off the hook" the way a pass/fail does. Indeed, these students are equally anxious regardless of whether they are getting an evaluation or a grade.

Finding that students report getting more out of graded courses presents a serious issue, especially as they report working no harder in these courses.

Examination of the correlates of "getting something out of" a course uncovered some interesting relationships. While these correlational data cannot conclusively support a causal relationship, it appears that the more feedback a student is given, the more she feels was "gotten out of" the course. The professor doing a lot of talking does not enhance this feeling (the non-significant correlation is slightly negative), it is the specific criticism and advice that seems to count.

It is not clear why the students felt they "got more out of" the graded classes, as there was no reported difference in feedback. While there is no relation between the student's perceived freedom to do what she wants in the course and a feeling of progress, it may be that the less structured approach supported by the college giving evaluations provides fewer benchmarks of progress. It may also be that there is a difference in the organization and structuring of the feedback which is crucial.

Another possibility is that the students have different feedback expectations for the two types of courses because the courses differ in both average size and apparent educational philosophy. They may have gotten more or better feedback than was expected in the graded courses or less or poorer than expected in the evaluation courses. In either event, the student is less sure that she "got something out of" the course. This is an area needing further study.

Having out-of-class contacts with the professor is one way of getting feedback, and it is gratifying to see that these dimensions are positively related. At least for these students, these contacts with faculty have been more than just casual socializing. The importance of out-of-class contacts has also been documented by Wilson, et al. (1975).

Students who get a lot of feedback also report working hard in the course. This relationship may well be circular. Perhaps you will get more feedback if you work hard; but it seems equally likely that getting feedback can stimulate the

student to work harder, as she is getting something for her effort.

Professors who provide a lot of feedback also make more of an attempt to know the students and seem to know the students' work better. It would seem these behaviors would provide necessary information for giving effective feedback, so these relationships are not surprising. Of course, getting a lot of feedback can also lead the students to feel that the professor is making an attempt to know them and does know their work. It is interesting to note that the perception that the professor actually knows the students in the class as individuals is unrelated to the feeling of getting something out of the course, though it is positively related to rating the course as enjoyable (.55, $p < .001$). Making the attempt to know the students suggests an active process, while actually knowing them may mean that no more active involvement is occurring; and thus, feedback stops. It is important for a professor to continue to provide feedback to those students he or she knows well, though this may be more difficult because there may seem to be little new to say.

Students who get a lot of feedback from the professor also report getting a lot of feedback from other students. An interaction between characteristics of the student and features of the class is likely. Some students may act in ways to encourage feedback, others to discourage it. Brophy and Good (1974) describe several relevant studies. However, it seems possible that professors may provide classroom climates which differentially encourage students to talk with one another; and this matter is worth further study.

Getting a lot of feedback and being anxious go together. It may be that anxious students seek more feedback, but getting critical comments may raise anxiety, not lower it. Further study is needed to clarify the direction of this relationship.

It is most interesting that the correlation between tests and feedback is negative. Apparently tests do not provide the kind of information these students

find meaningful. Perhaps these tests do little more than identify right and wrong answers. As far as these students are concerned, there is more to feedback than this. There is an important message here for programmed learning approaches.

While the importance of feedback for learning has been generally conceded, these data help broaden the conception of the relationship of feedback to a variety of student and faculty behaviors. More detailed studies of the components of feedback and of effective ways to deliver it can lead the way to more productive educational approaches.

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